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Women's Political Representation in Post-Soviet Republics: Parliamentary Elections in Georgia and Abkhazia

Eileen Connolly* & Karolina Ó Beacháin Stefańczak

Abstract

Collectively, the former communist states have a comparatively poor record when it comes to women's parliamentary representation. This has been blamed on the negative legacy of the Soviet system on contemporary gender relations (LaFont, 2001; Einhorn, 1993; Funk & Mueller, 1993; Jacquette & Wolchik, 1998) and the complex relationship between the electoral and party systems (Moser & Scheiner, 2012; Tremblay, 2012). Women's political representation in this group of states has remained an under-researched area (Moser & Scheiner, 2012), and this article focuses on two polities that have received very little attention from the academic literature – Georgia and the *de facto* state¹ of Abkhazia (that exists within the internationally recognised borders of Georgia). It focuses on two parliamentary contests in 2012, one in Georgia and one in the *de facto* state of Abkhazia. Taken together, these two contests are interesting, because in the 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia and in Abkhazia, the level of women's representation shifted significantly in opposite directions. In Georgia, women's representation increased from 6% in 2008 to 12% in 2012, while in Abkhazia women's representation dropped from 11.5% to 3%. These elections are discussed in the context of the electoral experience of the group of democratic post-Soviet republics and the atypical patterns in the relationship between electoral systems and levels of women's political representation observed in the literature on post-Soviet states.

Keywords: gender, elections, Georgia, Abkhazia, post-Soviet.

The post-Soviet republics have a comparatively poor record when it comes to the percentage of women parliamentarians. In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet system, women's political representation in these states dropped from an average of 30% in 1990 to 7.5% in 1995, at a time when the European average was 13.8% (Matland & Montgomery, 2003, p. 2). The level of women's representation has remained comparatively low at 18.6% in 2015, only slightly above the regional average for the Arab States at 18.1%, and below the regional average for Sub Saharan Africa at 22.7%; Europe (OSCE members) at 25.3%; and the Americas at 26.5%.² This has been blamed on a number of factors, including the negative impact of the legacy of the Soviet system on contemporary gender relations, the re-emergence of nationalism and conservative religious values, and the complex relationship between the electoral and party systems (Moser, 2001, Moser & Scheiner, 2012). The topic of women and political representation in this group of states has remained an under-researched area (Moser & Scheiner, 2012) with some countries, including Georgia and the *de facto* state³ of Abkhazia, receiving very little attention in the academic literature. To contribute to an understanding of the

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1 Throughout this paper the words 'parliament', 'legislature', 'state' are used to refer to any of the institutions, bodies or titles currently employed within Abkhazia, to avoid cluttering the text by using the terms *de facto* or 'self-declared'.

2 Figures from the IPU database.

3 Throughout this paper, the words 'parliament', 'legislature', 'state' are used to refer to any of the institutions, bodies or titles currently employed within Abkhazia, to avoid cluttering the text by using the terms *de facto* or 'self-declared'.

relationship between the formal structures of the political system and the level of female political representation, this article analyses two parliamentary contests in 2012: one in Georgia and one in the *de facto* state of Abkhazia (that exists within the internationally recognised borders of Georgia). Both polities have a low percentage of female members of parliament, and in these two elections the level of women's representation shifted significantly in opposite directions. In Georgia, women's representation increased from 6% to 12%, while in Abkhazia women's representation dropped from 11.5% to 2.8%. The elections in these polities are discussed in the context of the electoral experience of the group of non-EU, democratic, post-Soviet republics of which Georgia is a member and the democratic *de facto* states associated with the post-Soviet republics. This experience is analysed using the framework of the atypical patterns in the relationship between electoral systems, party systems and levels of women's political representation across the former communist states observed in the literature.

Gender and political representation in the former Soviet republics

The increase in women's parliamentary representation internationally from a global average of 12% in 1996 to 22.4% in 2015 has been attributed not only to the spread of democracy but also to the adoption of 'gender quotas' as part of the transition to democracy (Krook, 2009). In the decade after the collapse of communism, gender quotas as a means of improving women's political representation were not widely used in post-Soviet countries. Out of the five democratic former USSR republics, only Kyrgyzstan has an effective quota system, with Georgia and Armenia having weak forms of gender quotas. Gender quotas are most effective when used with proportional representation (PR) and closed list electoral systems in contrast to single member district (SMD) systems that are not amenable to the introduction of quotas (Moser & Scheiner, 2012; Norris & Krook, 2011; Griffith-Traversy, 2002; McAllister & Studlar, 2002; Moser, 2001; Rule, 1994). In addition to the impact of electoral systems, two other factors - party ideology and the social and economic status of women - correlate with the level of women's political representation, with parties of the left and states with higher than average economic and social gender equality more likely to have higher numbers of women in parliament (Krook & O'Brien, 2012; Connolly, 2013). The use of PR and a closed list system alone has also been identified as facilitating the election of women, apart from its association with the implementation of quotas, as under this form of electoral system the large district magnitude lowers the bar for election and allows the inclusion of both small parties and previously marginalised social groups (Matland & Studlar, 1996). However, this relationship does not hold in post-communist countries, where there has been an absence of a 'statistically significant difference between the percentage of women elected under PR and SMD', with women in some cases doing better under SMD (Moser, 2001, p. 365; Moser & Scheiner, 2012).

One explanation for the failure of women to do well under PR systems in post-Soviet states is social attitudes towards women in politics. This explanation is also linked to the low levels of women in politics in post-communist states across all types of electoral systems. A second key explanation centres on the type of party system and its relationship to the electoral system. The impact of the transition from the Soviet system on the status of women has varied between states, but the net effect on women's political participation has been a negative shift in attitudes towards women in public life (Usha, 2005), including 'societal resistance to the idea of women as political leaders', which has meant that political parties have not been under significant pressure from public opinion to increase the number of women candidates (Moser & Scheiner, 2012, p. 210). Negative perceptions of feminism due to the legacy of communism have been described as one of the main barriers to women's formal political power in the region (LaFont, 2001; Einhorn, 1993; Funk & Mueller, 1993; Jacqueline & Wolchik, 1998). As a result of this (albeit limited) reaction against the ideas of gender equality identified with the

Soviet period, gender conservative ideologies (including nationalism) that had far more legitimacy and public acceptance than feminism became popular in these post-Soviet states (Matland & Montgomery, 2003, pp. 37 and 40), resulting in an absence of any significant demand for measures to increase the participation of women in politics.

Political parties play a crucial role in mediating between social gender norms and outcomes in terms of the numbers of women in parliaments. This role can be positive by providing an institutional framework, which encourages women; alternatively it can be negative and parties can act as a barrier to women's engagement either for ideological reasons or because of the structure of the party system (Matland & Montgomery, 2003, p. 40). All of the post-Soviet states have fragmented and unstable party systems. In Moldova, for example, none of the political parties that were elected to the Parliament in 1994 stood for elections in 1998. The only formation that has been in Parliament since 1998 is the Party of Moldovan Communists. In the current Ukrainian Parliament, only one faction, the smallest 'Fatherland' party group of 19 MPs, was present in the 2012-2014 legislature. In such volatile party systems, it is difficult to promote gender equality measures in political parties (Norris & Krook, 2011; Munteanu, 2010).

The democratic former Soviet republics use either a mixed or fully proportional electoral system, but the fragmented and weakly institutionalised party systems interact with the 'impact of social norms with respect to the position of women in society' to reduce the expected beneficial impact of using a PR system (Moser & Scheiner, 2012, p. 215). Party fragmentation results in a low average party magnitude, which can mean that in highly fragmented systems only a small percentage of candidates are elected from each party, and given the lack of pressure to elect women candidates, this means that it is unlikely that women will be placed near the top of the list in an electable position (Moser, 2001, p. 345). At the same time, party fragmentation means there is usually a very large number of candidates in each constituency under SMD, reducing the number of votes needed to elect a successful candidate. This lower vote threshold can allow popular and well-funded women candidates to be elected (Moser & Scheiner, 2012, p. 214). The weak institutionalisation of parties can also put women at a disadvantage. 'Nearly all' of the parties in the post-Soviet republics initially emerged as personality based organisations, and in these circumstances the absence of strongly institutionalised parties creates a vacuum 'where the elites, patronage and clientelism dominate candidate recruitment', which as a result is 'dominated by party or faction leaders, reinforced by patriarchy, private ties and loyalty' – factors that are a major barrier for women seeking to enter politics (Ballington & Matland, 2004). The weakness of the political party system can also be demonstrated by the high percentage of candidates who are independents, unattached to any political party. This has been a factor in Ukraine, where independents won over half of the SDM seats in the last election in 2014, and in Abkhazia where independent candidates dominate the parliament.

The pattern of women's representation in the democratic post-Soviet republics⁴ appears to support the argument that proportional representation is more conducive to electing women to parliament, as these states have either a mixed or a PR electoral systems (table 1). The states with fully PR systems have higher percentages of female representation than those with mixed systems. In the two *de facto* states, Nagorno Karabakh with its mixed electoral system outperforms Abkhazia with a majoritarian system. This appears to be contrary to the collective experience of the former communist states described in the literature. The reality is more complex and this pattern of results is not an indication of a direct positive relationship between the type of electoral system and the number of women in parliament. In Ukraine, only 11.8% of the parliament are women, and although it has used a mixed system for the most recent election, for the 2006 and 2007 elections it used a fully proportional system

4 Countries that are ranked as 'partly free' by Freedom House and have a Polity score of at least +5 are included in this table and this article as democratic. This is not to ignore the problems these countries still have in their transition to democracy but to acknowledge that their levels of democracy are improving and that this is the trajectory of the state.

Table 1: Electoral Systems and quotas in non-authoritarian post-Soviet republics and de facto states⁵

| | % Women | Electoral system | Quota |
|------------------------|---------|--|----------------------------------|
| Ukraine | 11.8 | Mixed: 50% Majoritarian 50% proportional | No |
| Armenia | 10.7 | Mixed: 30% Majoritarian 70% Proportional | Legislative List 20% (2011) |
| Georgia | 12.0 | Mixed: 49% Majoritarian 51% Proportional | Financial incentive 2012 |
| Moldova | 20.8 | Proportional. | No |
| Kyrgyzstan | 23.3 | Proportional. | Legislative List 30% (2007/2011) |
| <i>De Facto States</i> | | | |
| Abkhazia | 2.2 | Majoritarian | No |
| Nagorno Karabakh | 9.0 | Mixed: 49% Majoritarian 51% Proportional | No |

Source: IPU database and CECs of de facto states

resulting in parliaments that had less than 9% women elected. Armenia uses a ‘list’ system for 70% of the parliamentary seats but has only 10.7% of its parliament made up of women. Georgia, with a mixed system, has elected at least 50% of its parliament through a list system since 1995, and although women performed better on the list system in the particular conditions of the 2008 election, this has not been a constituent experience.

A key reason for the weakness in the relationship between the use of a PR electoral system and increasing the number of women elected is the weakness or absence of quotas. Ukraine does not have quotas, and although Georgia and Armenia have quotas that apply to the PR list, they have not been effective. In Armenia, with a proportional list system for 70% (90) of the parliamentary seats, women’s representation at 10.7% is just over half the quota target of 20%. Although this requirement is met at the time of the registration of the party list, its effectiveness was limited since candidates can withdraw after the list has been accepted, and there had been a pattern of female candidates resigning before the elections take place (OSCE/ODIHR, 2012). Georgia introduced a financial incentive for parties to include more women on the party lists for the PR seats; however, the impact of this measure was limited as neither of the main electoral blocks that divided the PR seats between them met the target. Kyrgyzstan has an effective quota system introduced as part of a major reform of the political system, including the electoral system, following the upheaval of the Tulip Revolution in 2005 (Hughes, 2011). Prior to this, only 10% of the parliament was women. Moldova does not have a quota system in place, however, it has the second highest percentage of women in parliament of this group – 20.8% after the 2014 election. A factor that could account for Moldova’s comparatively high percentage of women in parliament is the relatively high level of support for the Communist party and since the 2014 election also for the Socialist Party, reflecting the established links between parties ‘of the left’ and higher levels of women’s political representation (Krook & O’Brien, 2012; Caul, 1999). Neither of the two *de facto* states have quotas, and the percentage women in the parliament of Nagorno Karabakh is similar to the post-Soviet republics that use a mixed electoral system.

In these five states and two *de facto* states, there is no clear pattern to the relationship between electoral systems, political party systems and the level of women’s political representation. The variation of women’s parliamentary representation in these states emphasises the importance of understanding the particular political conditions of each state to clarify the relationship between the electoral systems, the party system and electoral outcomes for women. Moser (2001) and Moser and Scheiner (2012) have drawn attention to the impact of party fragmentation and weakly institutionalised party systems on the number of women elected. They have emphasised that where parties are not well-institutionalised, poor party identification means that “voting depends on the personal characteristics of candidates and the patronage they can distribute” (Moser & Scheiner, 2012, p. 75), an informal system that works to the disadvantage of women. These relationships will now be discussed in the context of Georgia and Abkhazia.

5 It excludes the EU member states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

Georgia

Following Georgian independence from Soviet rule in 1991, the state experienced protracted political instability and the reassertion of ethnic tensions that lead to armed conflict and the emergence of the breakaway states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and ultimately to the war with Russia in 2008. The 2012 election was the first one that transferred power from the ruling party to the opposition in a peaceful, democratic way. In Georgia, both public opinion (NDI, 2012) and leaders of the main political parties are pro-Western in sentiment and see the state's future in the EU. This ambition has been strengthened by the signing of an EU Association Agreement in June 2014, which significantly deepened political and economic ties with the EU in the framework of the Eastern Partnership (Civil Georgia, 2014, June 27). Georgia's main political parties are united in the pro-European orientation of the state, but this has not yet led to a discussion on the adoption of European standards of equality policy.

In Georgia, in common with the rest of the Soviet Union, the ideology of the communist state promoted the principle of gender equality with a high percentage of women in public life including parliament, even if this was not reflected in the most influential circles of political power (Ishkanian, 2003). The transition from the USSR to the independent state meant the end of the formal structures that had supported women's political engagement, while at the same time the reassertion of 'traditional values' and the growing influence of the Orthodox Church mitigated against ideas of gender equality that would have supported calls for women's political representation (Sumbadze & Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2005; Javakhishvili & Bregvadze, 2000; Gadua, 1999). This growing gender conservatism also meant that although women in Georgia are comparatively well educated and have a high level of economic activity, on average they earn less than men (Khitashvili, 2009). Women also face a high level of 'domestic violence' accompanied by negative public attitudes towards the victims of such violence (Pkhakadze & Jamaspishvili, 2007). The inequalities faced by women in Georgia are reflected in the low level of women's engagement in national politics. Until the 2012 election, the percentage of the parliament that was female was less than 10% (table 2).

Political and electoral system in Georgia

Georgia had a strong presidential system in place for all the post-1992 elections until 2012. The 2012 legislative elections were transitional and were followed in 2013 by a presidential race that marked the move from a presidential to a parliamentary system. Georgia has used a mixed electoral system for all elections since the 1990s, and up to the 2008 contest the results fitted into the problematic pattern of the gendered outcomes identified above (Matland & Montgomery, 2003). In spite of Georgia's use of a single constituency list for at least half of its parliamentary seats, the percentage of women deputies varied only from 6% to 9.4%. Up to the 2004 election, Georgia's figures could be interpreted as a very slow incremental improvement for women. This trend ended in 2008, when the percentage of seats held by women dropped to 6%, making Georgia the lowest ranking country among OSCE member states (Norris & Krook, 2011). However, the 2008 vote is an anomaly as just prior to this election the size of the parliament was cut by just over a third, meaning that the contest was much more competitive than the previous election, perhaps with the effect of squeezing women out. In the 1995, 1999 and 2003/4 elections a majority (150) of MPs were elected through a proportional list system and 85 MPs to majoritarian seats. This was changed for the 2008 election, when the number of MPs elected through the party lists was drastically reduced to produce a parliament where 50% of MPs were elected through a proportional list and 50% through majoritarian seats.⁶ Following the

⁶ The proportion of seats was further amended before the 2012 elections to 51% proportional and 49% majoritarian seats.

Table 2: Women in parliamentary elections in Georgia

| Elections | Legislative body | Total number of deputies | Women deputies | Percentage of women |
|-----------|------------------|--------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1990 | Supreme Council | 250 | 18 | 7.2 |
| 1992 | Parliament | 222 | 14 | 6.3 |
| 1995 | Parliament | 250 | 16 | 6.4 |
| 1999 | Parliament | 235 | 17 | 7.2 |
| 2004 | Parliament | 235 | 22 | 9.4 |
| 2008 | Parliament | 150 | 9 | 6 |
| 2012 | Parliament | 150 | 18 | 12 |

Source: Nodia & Scholtbach, 2006: 172; CEC website and OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation reports

2008 election, the party of government, the United National Movement (UNM), had eight women MPs (one majoritarian and seven elected through the party list), while one other female MP was elected from the list of the Christian Democratic Movement. This meant that of the 75 majoritarian MPs, only one, Rusudan Kervalishvili, representing the Tbilisi Samgori district, was female. Although the representation of women was very low, in this case women did better in the list system seats at just over 10% than in the SMDs. This was also true of the 2004 election, where three women⁷ (3.5%) were elected in the majoritarian districts and 19 (12.5%) from the PR list.

In the Georgian electoral system, parties and 'blocs' have to receive at least 5% of the valid votes to be included in the allocation of PR seats.⁸ This threshold has the effect of cutting out smaller parties and encouraging the development of 'blocs' of parties with combined lists. This may have had an adverse impact on the placement of women in prominent positions on the party lists, as it adds an additional element of negotiation between male-dominated party leaderships. The contest for the majoritarian seats uses a two round system. To win in the first round, a candidate must receive at least 30%. Failing this, a second round is held between the two candidates who received the highest support in the first round.⁹ The Georgian system after the 2003 Rose Revolution has not encouraged independents, and it was only in 2012 that they have been allowed to stand. In order to be registered, an independent candidate has to demonstrate the support of at least 1% of voters of the electoral district in which they intend to stand (this requirement does not apply to incumbent MPs) and to pay a deposit of 5000 GEL, the equivalent of seven months' average salary,¹⁰ which is reimbursed only to those candidates who receive at least 10% of the vote.¹¹ This provision sets a high barrier for independent candidates and sets Georgia apart from some post communist states, where the weakness of political parties has encouraged the proliferation of non-party candidates.

Political party systems

Georgian political parties are constructed around strong personalities rather than institutionalized organisations, solid membership, ideology or cleavage (Ó Beacháin, 2009). Although political ideologies appear to be reflected in the names of the parties, for example, the Conservative Party of Georgia,

7 Nino Burjanadze, Sophio Lartsuliani and Nana Patarkatsishvili.

8 Seats are allocated by multiplying the total number of votes received by a particular party by the total number of proportional seats, 77, and then dividing the result by the total number of valid votes.

9 Article 126 of the Election Code of Georgia.

10 Average monthly salary in Georgia 2012 amounted to 712 GEL according to National Statistics Office. http://geostat.ge/?action=page&p_id=149&lang=eng

11 Article 116 of the Electio' Code of Georgia.

the Labour Party of Georgia, the Republican Party, or identified by the parties in their manifestoes and platforms, it does not provide a guide to the policy profile of the party, as would be expected in the established European democracies. Georgian Dream identifies itself as social democratic party in contrast to the centre-right United National Movement, however, there is a discrepancy between formally stated principles and party attitudes on individual policy issues. For example, while officially declaring itself to be of the 'left', the Georgian Dream is closely associated with the Orthodox Church, and its leaders have expressed very conservative opinions on social issues. UNM claims to be pro-European and liberal, nonetheless, on the flagship issue for many Western parties that is gender equality in political participation, they are the biggest opponents of gender quotas and when in power had the poorest record of female MPs (Ó Beacháin Stefańczak 2015). Under these conditions, mutual accusations of ideological opportunism are common in Georgian politics, and there are significant ideological differences between leaders and members of the same party (Nodia & Scholtbach, 2007). This lack of clear ideology also reinforces the informal personality-driven culture of the parties.

The 2012 elections in Georgia were contested by fourteen political parties, two election blocs (comprising of a further eight parties: six making up the Georgian Dream coalition and two being part of the Christian Democratic Union) and two independent candidates.¹² A number of these parties had virtually no support among voters, and even if the bar for 'party-significance' is defined at the very low level of at least 1% of the popular support in the pre-election opinion polls,¹³ only two parties, the United National Movement (UNM) party and Georgian Labour Party, and the two election blocs, the Georgian Dream Coalition¹⁴ and the Christian Democratic Union¹⁵ met this criteria.

The ruling party at the time of the 2012 elections, the United National Movement, was founded in 2001 by Mikheil Saakashvili. The UNM is a centre-right formation that had been in government since 2004 and is affiliated with the European People's Party (EPP).¹⁶ The main challenger in the 2012 election was Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia (GD), a party established in April 2012 that emerged from a movement of the same name launched in December 2011 by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Its acting leader was a woman – Manana Kobakhidze, and Bidzina Ivanishvili was the honorary chair.¹⁷ The leadership group that managed the party was a political council consisting of 21 members, five of whom were female,¹⁸ a much higher proportion of women than their parliamentary representation after 2012. Georgian Dream was the main party within the GD election coalition of five other parties. The oldest of these parties was the small Republican Party of Georgia,¹⁹ founded in 1978 as a dissident party, which was always marginal and not considered a threat by the Soviet state. Of the four remaining parties, the largest was Our Georgia – Free Democrats founded in July 2009, other three parties were the National Forum, established in December 2006,²⁰ the Conservative Party of Georgia, founded in 2001,²¹ and Industry Will Save Georgia, founded in April 1999.²² The most

12 CEC Report on The Elections of the Parliament of Georgia 2012.

13 According to the August 2012 National Democratic Institute opinion polls <http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-Aug-2012-Survey.pdf>, accessed on 2013.05.25; the Labour Party of Georgia is included in the poll under the 'other opposition', however on 1 October ballot Shalva Natelashvili's party received over 1% of the vote.

14 Democratic Georgia; Republican Party of Georgia; Our Georgia – Free Democrats; the National Forum; The Conservative Party of Georgia, and Industry Will Save Georgia.

15 The Christian Democratic Movement and the European Democrats of Georgia.

16 More information about the party is available on its website: <http://www.unm.ge>.

17 Citizenship issues prevented him becoming party leader. Information from the Georgian Dream website. Available at <http://gd.ge> accessed 2013.05.25

18 In May 2013 they were Eka Beselia, Guguli Magradze, Eliso Chapidze, Irina Imerlishvili and Manana Kobakhidze; in February 2015 the Political Council consists of 12 members, two of them are women: Manana Kobakhidze and Eka Beselia.

19 The new leader of the party, elected in November 2013, is a woman Khatuna Samnidze <http://dfwatch.net/khatuna-samnidze-elected-new-republican-party-leader-62377> accessed 2014.01.30.

20 Party website accessed on 2013.05.30. <http://forumi.ge/>

21 Party website accessed on 2013.05.30. <http://conservatives.ge>

22 Party website accessed on 2013.05.30 <http://www.industrials.ge/>

significant of the challenging parties/coalitions not participating in the GD alliance were the left leaning Georgian Labour Party, founded in 1995,²³ and the Christian Democratic Union election bloc. The latter was an alliance between the Christian Democratic Movement, founded in February 2008, and the European Democrats of Georgia (formerly known as 'We, Ourselves'), established in 2005 by refugees from Abkhazia.²⁴

At the time of the 2012 election, the average age of the significant political parties contesting the election was 8.6 years, the party of government had existed for 11 years, and the main challenger had been formed the year the elections took place. Given that the Georgian post-Soviet state had existed for 22 years and no significant party dates from the beginning of the independent state, the oldest being the very small Republican and Labour Parties, this was a measure of the very high level of instability in the party system.

The 2012 elections

In the months prior to the 2012 elections, Georgian public opinion was extremely polarised between two key blocks – billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream coalition opposing President Mikheil Saakashvili and the ruling UNM party. The majority of public support was initially on the side of the incumbent party, but the numbers in favour of the opposition were steadily rising.²⁵ Bidzina Ivanishvili's wealth and reputation for philanthropy had united virtually all the anti-Saakashvili's opposition around him, while the UNM had the advantage of controlling the power of the state with its substantial administrative resources. The 2012 election campaign had a high involvement of young people, a high level of direct contact with voters, and also a high level of election-related activity on the internet.

Two events had a major impact on the campaign and influenced the final outcome: the disproportionate fines imposed on the opposition for infringing electoral law, and what became known as the prison scandal. A new regulation to improve the transparency of political parties and campaign finances was introduced in Georgia in early 2012. The State Audit Office (SAO)²⁶ was re-established to oversee the legality of the pre-election spending. The agency was headed by an UNM politician Lasha Tordia²⁷ who – according to the opposition and independent watchdogs²⁸ – was applying a selective approach, using controversial actions and disproportionate and excessive fines aimed at the opposition. The leader of opposition GD was fined a total of GEL 148.68 million, or about USD 90.9 million (Civil Georgia, 2012, June 11). The amount of the fine equalled 2% of Georgia's national budget and approximately 1.5% of Ivanishvili's personal fortune, estimated by Forbes in 2012 to be 6.4 billion USD.²⁹ The SAO accused Ivanishvili of violating party funding rules by providing transportation services under 'preferential' terms to his GD activists and by distributing, free of charge, Global TV satellite dish antennas. In order to collect the fines, Georgian Dream's bank accounts were seized and during the crucial pre-election period the opposition was left without sufficient funds for campaigning. Despite Ivanishvili's wealth, his party's candidates couldn't cover the costs of basic campaign expenditures.³⁰

23 <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=16635>

24 Party website accessed on 2013.05.30. <http://www.ged.ge>

25 NDI-commissioned opinion polls from February and June 2012 <http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia-NDI-survey-update-June2012-ENG.pdf> page 82; accessed on 2013.05.30.

26 More on a State Audit Office history and development: http://sao.ge/?action=page&p_id=74&lang=eng, accessed on 2013.05.30.

27 Appointed by the Parliament on 25 July (Civil Georgia, 2012, July 25; Caucasus Elections Watch, 2012).

28 Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA): <http://gyla.ge/eng/news?info=1300&print=1>; Open Society Georgian Foundation: http://www.osgf.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=15&info_id=3062

29 Forbes, Bidzina Ivanishvili's profile <http://www.forbes.com/profile/bidzina-ivanishvili/> accessed on 2013.05.28.

30 Interview with Zviad Gelashvili, campaign manager of Eka Beselia, conducted on 2013.02.23.

Table 3: Percentage of women candidates on party lists

| Name of Party (Bloc) | Candidates Total | Number of women | % Women | Met gender quota? | % National Poll |
|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Georgian Dream | 200 | 33 | 16.50% | N | 54.97% |
| United National Movement | 155 | 17 | 11% | N | 40.34% |
| Christian Democratic Union | 163 | 47 | 28.80% | Y | 2.04% |
| Labour Party of Georgia | 167 | 36 | 21.50% | N | 1.24% |

Source: authors' compilation from the CEC Georgia data

Table 4: Number of women MPs elected to the Parliament of Georgia in October 2012

| | |
|---|----------------------|
| <i>Bidzina Ivanishvili – Georgian Dream</i> | |
| Proportional | 6 of 44 (13.6%) |
| Majoritarian | 6 of 41 (14.6%) |
| Total | 12 of 85 (14.1%) |
| <i>United National Movement</i> | |
| Proportional | 5 of 33 (15.1%) |
| Majoritarian | 1 of 32 (3.1%) |
| Total | 6 of 65 (9.2%) |
| Total | 18 (12%) |
| Proportional | 11 out of 77 (14.3%) |
| Majoritarian | 7 out of 73 (9.5%) |

Source: authors' compilation from the CEC Georgia data

The actions of the SAO and electorally motivated public spending (Transparency International, 2012) resulted in unequal campaign resources being available to the opposition and ruling party and exposed the abuse of administrative resources by the UNM. Following this, on 18 September, just days before the elections, two opposition TV stations, Maestro and Chanel 9, aired shocking videos of the abuse and rape of prison inmates.³¹ The street protests, which mobilised thousands, began on the night the videos were shown and continued for days (Civil Georgia, 2012, September 20). As part of the government's response, the Prison System Minister and the Interior Minister resigned and several officials were arrested (Civil Georgia, 2012, September 27). These events harmed the ruling party and were influential in increasing support for the opposition Georgian Dream coalition.³² Both key events indicated the use of unfair tactics, amounting to abuse of the electoral system on the part of both the ruling party and the main opposition group. In this charged atmosphere, there was very little emphasis on the substantive policy differences between the blocks and no mention of gender equality or pro-women policies.

In the Georgian election, there was a significantly larger proportion of women candidates compared to the 12% of women deputies elected to the parliament – of the 2,757 candidates, 28.4 % (783) were women (OSCE/ODIHR, 2012). This is atypical internationally, as usually the percentage of women elected approximates to the proportion of women candidates (Wangnerud, 2009). A significant proportion of this discrepancy can be explained by the large number of candidates on the party lists. A total of 444 candidates contested the 73 majoritarian seats compared to the 2,313 that contested the 77 proportional seats – on average 6 candidates in each majoritarian constituency compared to the average of 30 candidates for every proportional seat. Table 3 shows the proportion of women

31 Video from Chanel 9 available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozecFhW3SH4> accessed on 2013.05.30

32 Gelashvili, 2013 and author's conclusions drawn from observations of the last days of the campaign and from the conversations with Georgian politicians and civil society activists.

candidates on the party lists for the four significant parties/ party blocs (that is those that received over 1% of the national poll). These four electoral groups made up only 30% (685) of all candidates on party lists, an indication of the large number of insignificant groups that contested this election. Women made up nearly 20% of the candidates for these four groups but only 13.5% for the two groups that divided the election between them. Women made up 25% of the candidates for the unsuccessful parties that did not pass the 5% threshold, and therefore were not allocated seats. Of the candidates for the majoritarian seats, 13.3% (59) were women, of whom seven were elected, so women made up 9.5% of majoritarian MPs compared to the 14.3% of MPs in the proportional seats.

The financial incentives for political parties introduced by the Georgian Parliament in 2012 to promote more balanced gender representation had been motivated by the very low proportion of women elected in 2008, which undermined Georgia's international democratic credentials, and was an issue of importance for the then President and UNM leader Mikheil Saakashvili. The quotas were generally ineffective; of the four significant electoral groups, three did not fulfil the criteria. The provision required that the 20% of women candidates be evenly distributed throughout the list with at least 2 women in each block of 10 candidates. Neither UNM nor Georgian Dream needed the money available from the state and did not respond to the financial motivation to increase the parliamentary representation of women. Only the Christian Democratic Union Bloc, a coalition of CDM, a party with very conservative views on women's roles in society and a minor party with virtually no public support, met the gender criteria and qualified for additional subsidies, and as their share of the vote was only 2% it seems likely they fulfilled these conditions primarily for the financial incentives. The Labour Party's list was over 20% women, but it did not meet the ranking conditions, as although it had 4 women amongst the first 20 candidates it had no female candidates between 19 and 49, even though given the level of support for the party these candidates were unlikely to get elected.

In spite of the failure of the financial incentive, the 2012 election increased the number of women in parliament. There was an increase of women MPs elected through the proportional system – from eight out of 75 in 2008 (10.6%) to 11 out of 77 (14.3%) in 2012. While there is a higher percentage of women elected in proportional seats when looking at the overall results (table 4), it is clear that this result is driven by the very low percentage of successful candidates in majoritarian seats for UNM, which at 3% stands out as an anomaly in the election results. In the previous term of Parliament dominated by UNM, there was only one female majoritarian MP (1.33%), and in the 2012 election UNM had continued the pattern they had adopted in the previous election, running only three female candidates for majoritarian seats. However, three UNM women incumbents, who had entered parliament in 2008 through the party list, retained their seats, with one, Marika Verulashvili, re-elected as majoritarian MP for Kvareli district,³³ indicating that she had the support of the party and also that the electorate were willing to vote for women. In contrast, Georgian Dream fielded female candidates in winnable majoritarian seats, such as in Tbilisi, where GD support was higher than in the rest of the country and also in Ivanishvili's home district of Sachkhere. The GD coalition also chose female candidates that were well-established politicians and activists with good name recognition and reputation, including Tea Tsulukiani, Tinatin Khidasheli and Eka Beselia, who were well prepared and equipped to contest the elections. As a result, Georgian Dream had a slightly higher percentage of women in the majoritarian seats at 14.6%, compared to 13.6% of women in their proportional seats. For UNM, the proportional percentage is much higher at 15.1% than the proportion of women occupying UNM majoritarian seats (3.1%).

The election results in Georgia are an example of the atypical relationship in terms of the gendered outcomes in contests using proportional and majoritarian seats identified in the former Soviet republics. In Georgia in spite of financial incentives to include women candidates on the list systems, there is no evidence that the use of party list systems was a significant advantage to

33 Khatuna Gogorishvili and Chiora Taktakishvili were re-elected as party list MPs.

women or that they will be in the future. However, there is evidence of a weak underlying trend of improvement in the number of women engaged in politics, which amongst other things could be linked to Georgia's higher level of international engagement, its links to the EU, and its perception of itself as a European state. The Georgian case indicates that an extension of electoral systems and incentives used in established European democracies into the post-Soviet region will not inevitably produce the anticipated outcomes leading to an increase in women's representation. In the absence of stable and institutionalised political parties, it is difficult for women to organise and secure favourable positions on party lists or gain party support in winnable majoritarian constituencies. There is also little external political debate in wider society to pressurise party elites towards reform.

Abkhazia

The formation of the *de facto* independent Abkhazia in the early 1990s was one of the consequences of the break-up of the USSR and the resulting emergence of local nationalisms and ethnic tension (Ó Beacháin, 2012). Like other post-Soviet states, Abkhazia experienced a reassertion of traditional family values, but in this case the impact of this shift was weakened as a result of the war with Georgia. So although the war, in which men were the majority of soldiers, emphasised the conventional division of duties, the aftermath of the conflict brought a change in the responsibilities of men and women in families and society. The economic blockade of Abkhazia by Russia throughout the 1990s, combined with the post-war trauma, had a substantial negative impact on families (O'Loughlin, Kolossov & Toal, 2011) and influenced gender roles. During the blockade, men could not cross the border and therefore were unable to trade and earn money. This meant that women were often the only breadwinners in their families, while at the same time they were also expected to fulfil their 'traditional' duties at home. This experience resulted in an additional burden for women, but also gave them great sense of purpose and social importance while undermining those of men.

The size of the Abkhazian population, approximately 250 thousand (ApsnyPress, 2011, December 28) compared to a population of over 4 million in Georgia, creates a personal political environment, which is also reflected in official processes within parties, organisations and state institutions (Veenendaal & Corbett, 2015). Informal links, including family connections, friendships and relations from the war, matter more than qualifications, ideology and formal political affiliations.³⁴ This is exacerbated by the institutional weakness of political parties as men, on average, do better in weak party systems (Caul, 1999; Lovenduski & Norris, 1993), as informal selection processes disadvantage women (Cheng & Tavits, 2009). For Abkhazia, the March 2012 elections were also notable as the first People's Assembly contest since the *de facto* state was formally recognised by Russia in 2008.

Political and electoral systems in Abkhazia

Abkhazia has a very strong presidential system that assigns little power to the parliament and it has used a majoritarian system for all elections since the 1990s. In the Abkhazian majoritarian system, there is a provision for a second round of voting if no candidate reaches a 50% threshold in the first round, with a minimum turnout of 25% of the electorate required for the elections to be valid.³⁵ Prior to the 2012 contest, the range of women's political representation had varied between 5.7% and 11.4% (table 5). The results do not demonstrate any improvement over time, as the percentage of women in

34 Interviews during the March 2012 campaign with candidates, elections managers, activists and analysts.

35 The Constitutional Law of the Republic of Abkhazia On the Election of Deputies of the National Assembly - Parliament of the Republic of Abkhazia.

Table 5: Abkhazia – women in parliamentary elections

| Elections | Legislative body | Total number of deputies | Women deputies | Percentage of women |
|-----------|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1991* | National Assembly | 28 | 2 | 7 |
| 1996 | National Assembly | 35 | 4 | 11.4 |
| 2002 | National Assembly | 35 | 2 | 5.7 |
| 2007 | National Assembly | 35 | 3 / 4** | 8.5 / 11.4** |
| 2012 | National Assembly | 35 | 1 | 2.8 |

* The numbers refer to the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic's Supreme Soviet

** The by-election victory of Emma Gamisonia in 2008 brought a fourth woman MP to the People's Assembly, increasing the percentage of female lawmakers from 8.5% to 11.4%.

Source: CEC of Abkhazia

parliament fluctuated in alternate elections. Prior to 2012, the highly contested Abkhaz parliamentary elections of 2007 (Ó Beacháin, 2012) resulted in the election of three female MPs out of 35 seats.³⁶ This was followed by a by-election in 2008 which brought a fourth woman MP³⁷ to the People's Assembly, increasing the percentage of female deputies from 8.5 % to 11.4 %, matching the previous highest percentage of 1996.

The Abkhazian political system places restrictions on political parties, limiting the number of candidates that can be nominated by political parties to a maximum of 11 out of 35. This weakens the parliament, as it is impossible for any party to have a majority and it has also been a contributory factor to the weak and unstable party system. The corollary of this is that the system encourages independents; in 2012 they made up the majority of candidates – 113 independent candidates compared to 35 from four political parties.³⁸

Given the dominance of the office of president in the political system, the parties are formed around individuals with presidential ambitions rather than ideas. The United Abkhazia (UA) party, which put forward 11 candidates in 2012, was established in 2004 as a movement and transformed in 2009 into a political organisation³⁹ as an opposition party to Abkhazia's first President Vladislav Ardzinba. From 2005, UA was associated with his successor Sergey Bagapsh. After Bagapsh's unexpected death in 2011, the party lost its influence and patronage. The largest opposition party during the 2012 election was the Forum for National Unity (FNU), founded in 2005,⁴⁰ which also ran 11 candidates. Led by a former Prime Minister and Vice President of Abkhazia Raul Khadjimba,⁴¹ the party represented the interests of Abkhaz nationalists, advocating partnership with rather than subordination to Russia. The Party for the Economic Development of Abkhazia (ERA)⁴² established in 2007,⁴³ which registered six candidates, was led by its founder Beslan Butba,⁴⁴ reputedly the richest man in Abkhazia. The Communist Party of Abkhazia was the least significant of the four parties contesting the elections with seven candidates. The instability of the party system is demonstrated by the fact that three of the four parties contesting the election were less than 8 years old.

36 Irina Agrba, Amra Agrba and Rita Lolua. Irina Agrba was selected deputy speaker of the Parliament, the highest post held by a woman in Abkhazia.

37 Emma Gamisonia.

38 Data provided to one of the author sby the Central Election Commission of Abkhazia in March 2012.

39 Website of United Abkhazia <http://rppea.org/party/history/> accessed 2013.05.01.

40 Кавказский узел 'В Абхазии создан Форум народного единства' <http://abkhasia.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/69877>

41 Raul Khadjimba was elected President of Abkhazia in August 2014.

42 Party's website: <http://era-abkhasia.org/> accessed 2013.05.01.

43 Кавказский узел 'В Абхазии создана новая политическая партия'. <http://abkhasia.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/69877>

44 Unsuccessful Presidential candidate from 2009 and Prime Minister of Abkhazia between 2014 ad 2015.

The 2012 election

In Abkhazia, the result of the parliamentary election of March 2012 was a disappointment for women, with only 1 woman elected – 2.8% of the parliament. Of the three female incumbent MPs that were seeking re-election, only the independent Emma Gamisonia was successful. The percentage of women candidates was also low; at only 10.8% (16) of the 148 candidates for the 35 seats, and in 22 out of the 35 constituencies there were no women candidates. A higher proportion of female candidates stood for political parties; 31.3% of the women candidates were party candidates (5 out of 16), compared to 22.7% of men (30 out of 132). Looking at the figures from the other direction, women made up just over 14% of all party candidates and 9.7% of all independent candidates. Of the political parties, ERA had the largest proportion of female candidates at 33% (two out of six). The Communist Party was next with 14% (one women candidate out of seven). For both the UA and the Forum of National Unity, their percentage of female candidates was 9%, (one out of eleven). In the parliament elected in 2012, only 20% (7) of seats were filled by party candidates: 4 from FNU and 3 from United Abkhazia, the two parties that had fielded the lowest proportion of female candidates. Although women ended up winning only one seat, 3 women, two to them incumbents, including Rita Lolua of the FNU who had been the party's only female candidate, made it into a second round of voting. The percentage of female MPs after the 2012 election means that if Abkhazia were a recognised state, it would rank 178 out of 186 countries internationally.⁴⁵

During the election campaign, family connections, friendships and relations with war comrades were overwhelmingly important.⁴⁶ Family and community support was crucial to candidates, as Irina Agrba stated, *the most negative thing that I see in our elections is the factor of family relations. For example my opponent Adleiba is a representative of a very large family, they say that they have to support him while knowing that there are better candidates than him.*⁴⁷ These sets of relationships were deepened by the campaign focus on the welfare of war veterans, the future for young people and the reform of the health system.⁴⁸ The electoral environment of Abkhazia embeds the accumulation of institutional disadvantages for women candidates; the gender division in family and society, the majoritarian voting system, weak political parties, and highly personalised campaigns with informal linkages determining the vote more than policies; all of which results in the highly unfavourable political landscape for female activists and makes it very difficult for them to be elected.

The Abkhazian electoral system actively discourages the development of political parties, weakening their potential institutional capacity to actively promote women as political representatives. This exaggerates the anticipated negative aspects of a majoritarian electoral system for women. Also the isolation of Abkhazia as an unrecognised state and the fact that its primary external relationship is with Russia (which also has a very low level of women's representation in parliament by international standards), means that international ideas around the promotion of equality of political representation are not likely to find resonance within Abkhazia's political discourse in a way that would assist the promotion of change in the future.

Conclusion

Women's political representation in Georgia and Abkhazia fits into the patterns identified in post-Soviet states, where the strong position of women in society does not automatically transfer to political influence. Both have a weakly institutionalised party system in which political parties are

⁴⁵ Calculated from IPU rankings of November 2013.

⁴⁶ Those factors were emphasised by several interviewees during the March 2012 campaign, including candidates, elections managers, activists and analysts.

⁴⁷ Interview with Irina Agrba conducted on 2012.03.07.

⁴⁸ Author's observations from the March 2012 campaign.

built around dominant personalities and the desire to capture the presidency, although this weakness is much more pronounced in Abkhazia. In both states, the weakness of the political parties is indicated by their instability measured in terms of the low average age of the parties contesting the elections and in Georgia also by the large number of very small parties that are not electorally significant. Although both states lack societal pressure to promote gender equality in political representation, the weakness of the political parties means that the institution through which the promotion of gender quality has happened in other states has a very limited capacity in Georgia and Abkhazia to produce change. However, in spite of this qualification, the elections in Georgia demonstrate that in this case it is the actions and decisions of the political parties rather than the electoral system per se that had the biggest influence on the outcome of the election for women. In Georgia the two main electoral blocks had different strategies with regard to the placement of women candidates. This produced divergent results, as for the UNM many more women were elected through the list system than the majoritarian seats, while for GM a slightly higher proportion of women were elected as constituency MPs. By contrast, Abkhazia is an extreme case in the post-Soviet region, as its political system is premised on limiting the capacity of political parties to organise and win seats and on an extremely strong presidency that dominates a weak parliament. In these conditions, where the political system is premised on informal relationships and in a social system that does not support gender equality, it is perhaps not surprising that the proportion of women parliamentarians is so low. In the case of Abkhazia, it is the fundamental design of the political system and the lack of formal political institutions, through which social values that do not support women in positions of political leadership could be moderated, that produces the very low number of women in parliament. In Georgia it has been the lack of political will by the political parties, exacerbated by the instability of the party system which has resulted in parties disappearing and new parties emerging each electoral cycle. This increases the personality driven and informal nature of internal party organisation and acts as barrier to building formal internal processes that are more conducive to the selection of women.

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